

## **Can Environmental Behavior Change for Selfish Reasons be Sustainable?**

**10-06-2008**

A new study from the World Wildlife Fund—United Kingdom questions the long-term validity and sustainability of current behavior change education that uses social marketing principles, and makes a case for the idea that if your end goal is to create sustainable environmental actions and ethics among your constituents, people have to be willing to change for the right reasons, rather than selfish reasons, which social marketing campaigns often promote.

Social marketing is designed to promote a compelling reason for people to make a change in their lifestyle. Much of the time, especially where the environment is concerned, we promote personal gain as the reason for change. We tell people that will can save money, look cool to friends and neighbors, save time or keep their kids and pets safe. While that is true—I personally only promote benefits I believe to be true—my employers want people to take on actions to improve or preserve the quality of the water, air, wildlife, etc.

The bottom line question seems to be: If people make a change that benefits the earth, does it really matter if they do it to save a little bit of time or money, or to fit into their community norms? The authors of the WWF-UK study believe that it does matter.

*Marketing approaches to creating behavioural change may be the most effective way of motivating specific change, on a piecemeal basis. But the evidence presented in this report suggests that such approaches may actually serve to defer, or even undermine, prospects for the more far-reaching and systemic behavioural changes that are needed.*

*There is little evidence that, in the course of encouraging individuals to adopt simple and painless behavioural changes, this will in turn motivate them to engage in more significant changes.* Tom Crompton, Change Strategist, as part of WWF-UK's Strategies for Change Project.

<http://www.wwf.org.uk/strategiesforchange>

Crompton refers to traditional social marketing strategies as “Toe in the door” approaches to behavior change. He believes that these approaches are not effective at creating a lasting environmental ethic. He does not believe that people will take on larger, more substantial changes for the environment's sake, unless they started by adopting small simple changes for the sake of the environment, instead of for some personal, unrelated reason.

While I think that Crompton and the WWF make some very good points, I believe you can create an environmental effect that started with one or a few simple actions that were done for personal gain.

Recycling is a personal example. In America, many of us got our introduction to personal recycling in the 70s or 80s by recycling aluminum cans for a few cents a pound. As an adolescent and a teenager I would collect all the cans our family would use. I also

collected cans that were thrown away at the small business my father owned. After I had collected a bunch, I'd cash in. At least once I donated them to a can drive that my school was doing as a fundraiser. While there are a lot of adults I know who still collect their cans and take them to the recycling center for money, I have long since given up that habit for disposing of my cans in the curbside recycling bin. Because of those bins (that were originally promoted as convenient and what everyone is doing) I now recycle paper and plastics as well. Our local city does not accept glass. We often save up our glass and take it to a recycling bin that accepts it. We don't do that 100 percent of the time. However, in my case, and the anecdotal cases of several people I know, we have a fairly strong environmental ethic that started by getting a few pennies for collecting cans. I am now experimenting with wind and solar energy on a small scale. If I save 10, 20, or even 30 percent on my monthly power bill, it will still take a long time to see a profit on the time, effort and money I am investing in this effort. It isn't about the money for me. I truly am interested in helping conserve our resources.

However, my most compelling argument for promoting simple behavior changes for any reason, is that if they change for personal gain, they still change. Despite Al Gore's WE foundation and the Pickens Plan, I think there are a lot of people in this country who aren't worried about our limited resources, who don't believe in global warming, and who don't believe they cause water pollution. I think we are far behind England and the rest of Europe, when it comes to environmental consciousness. If people are not likely to change for the "right" reasons any time soon; if they do not believe that their actions make that much of a difference, then we need to entice them to change for any reason that works for them. In the meantime, we continue to educate people, and help them to understand the right reasons to change.

That's my take. I encourage you to read the report and share your opinion.